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THE USE OF PHONETICS AND THE PHONOGRAPH IN THE TEACHING OF ELEMENTARY FRENCH

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With the insistent demand that is beginning to make itself felt in America for greater efficiency and less waste of time and of effort in educational processes, it may perhaps not be too sanguine to hope that the near future will develop the type of school in which the problem of education will be faced in its entirety, and the child will be taught the right subjects, in the right way, and at the right time, irrespective of artificial divisions into primary, secondary, or college work. Only thus shall eventually waste be avoided and efficiency increased.

In this school of the future the problem of the teaching of modern languages will present itself under a very different aspect from the one it has in American schools today. It is an established fact that young children possess a faculty for the acquisition of languages which is weakened in adolescence, even in those children in whom the study of other languages besides their own has tended to maintain it; this faculty may have completely disappeared in adolescents who have never learned any language besides their mother-tongue. The present-day scheme of education in America takes no account of these well-known facts, and regularly postpones the study of modern languages to an age when the language-acquiring faculty is greatly weakened or even completely atrophied in the majority of pupils, and when the gifted minority can learn to master the language only with an undue expenditure of work and a great waste of time.

While we are waiting for the opportunity to achieve "the absolute best" in the teaching of modern languages under improved conditions, it may not be without value to try to attain to the "best" that is possible under existing conditions. A desire to work toward this end prompted the experiments of which I now

submit an account to those who, like myself, are concerned in raising the status of the study of modern languages in our schools. I do this in the hope that those who have experimented along the same lines will contribute to the work the benefit of their own experience, and that others may, perhaps, be interested enough to undertake and forward this work of experimentation.

The problem as it appeared to me (when I took charge of the French and German department at Ottawa University in the fall of 1905) may be stated something like this: What can be done *under existing conditions* (1) to present the French language to the students as it really is; (2) to utilize in the process of learning, to its fullest extent, the students' mental equipment as their previous academic training has made it; (3) to efficiently stimulate and develop all latent "language-acquiring" ability?

French is a living language, and the student who devotes his time to its study is entitled to its knowledge as such. But a living language is primarily a thing of sounds, not of signs. Moreover, in no other language, perhaps, are morphology and syntax so completely under the sway of phonetical law as is the case in French. With some knowledge of French "phonetics" we can account for all the chief irregularities of inflection by three, at the utmost four, simple statements, which by repetition and continual application become as familiar to the student as the multiplication-table, and quite as serviceable. And if the students are expected to bring to the French recitation-room and utilize there the best training they receive, for example, in their science-work, it is imperative to allow them to keep the attitude of mind that in science-work is most fruitful of results. This implies presenting to the students the essential truths concerning the French language, not mere expedient superficialities, rules of thumb, framed principally to relieve teachers and students from the distasteful task of thinking. It is not only necessary to present these truths to the students, but it is also necessary gradually to train them to observe and verify these truths for themselves. The peculiar relation between spoken and written French is such, that the rules that apply to written French do not state the truth about spoken French; the student who has carefully learned the rule that the feminine

of certain words is formed by adding "silent e" to the masculine, can certainly not observe and verify the truth of this rule when, left utterly unprepared for the discrepancy, he hears, in speech, *verte* and *heureuse* used as the feminines of *vert* and *heureux*. The inevitable result is confusion: but in sane education, "to confuse is a crime." And we may add: "How many crimes, oh, grammar, are committed in thy name!"

Consequently, it seems inevitable to present the French language first as a "thing of sounds." It might be objected here, that the situation could be met exactly by resorting, if not to the so-called "natural" method, at least to some one of the different varieties of the "reform-method," which is giving a good account of itself in German schools. But the conditions that make the reform-method successful in German schools do not obtain here, chief among these being the relative importance and time assigned to classroom work and to preparation, and the careful training of German pupils in learning by word of mouth and in indefinitely retaining what they have thus learned. In America the "burden of learning" in high school and college is borne by the preparation-period, not by the classroom period, as is the case in Germany; high-school pupils have, on the whole, lost the happy faculty of learning by word of mouth, and the great majority consider it a hardship to be held responsible for anything but the day's assignment. It stands to reason that it is futile to expect in schools good and lasting results from methods that presuppose for their success certain conditions, so long as these conditions themselves are not realizable.

Under existing conditions, the problem, then, is to leave the burden of learning as much as possible where the general American system of instruction has placed it, in the time allotted to preparation, and still, during this time, bring the student into contact with the living, spoken language, not merely with the dead letter. Fortunately the progress of science and the genius of an Edison have made this very thing possible: the phonograph seems exactly invented to fill the need. The phonograph, however, to remain a valuable *instrument de travail*, and not to degenerate into a mere plaything, has to be judiciously and systematically used. The

mere "juxtaposition" of an American preparatory or college class with a phonograph or phonographs can be expected to result in some profitable entertainment, but it does not, left to itself, give promise of resulting in serious "work."

Even the desired phonographs were not at hand when the elementary French class at Ottawa University began its work in the fall of 1905, nor at first blush did the environment look promising for any enterprising innovations. The average preparation of the students for the work was not of the best, since no modern language had been begun until the last year of the three-year preparatory course or the Freshman year in college. Moreover, the students were allowed to carry exceedingly heavy schedules, and were overburdened with "student activities," lectures, and church and other entertainments, which they were urged to attend. To this must be added the fact that the great majority of the students were working to help themselves through school, a condition of things apt to enlist the sympathy of an instructor, but not conducive to good preparation. It proved no uncommon thing at the beginning of the year for a third of the class to come to the recitation "unprepared," and, what was infinitely worse, much of the work that was apparently done was really worthless, because it was not honest. Widespread as the evil of cheating seemed, it really proved to be but skin-deep, and yielded to an earnest appeal to the honesty and common-sense of the students. With the problem of dishonesty there also disappeared from the department any trace of what might be termed a problem of discipline, and the "spirit" certainly proved to be all that the most exacting teacher could desire.

The books placed into the hands of the class were Whitney's *Introductory French Reader* and Larousse's *Lexicographie (cours moyen)*, but no books at all were used for the first weeks, the black-board and the students' notebooks being the chief reliance. The first lessons consisted of a few minutes of the ordinary "object-lesson" conversation (*Voici un livre, un crayon*, etc. *Qu'est-ce que ceci?* etc.), intended just as an entering wedge to show that French could really be spoken. The real "work" of the class consisted of a rapid and simplified survey of the elements of phonetics and a study of French sounds. Being particularly familiar with the

work of Mr. Paul Passy, I took as a basis of this survey *Les sons du français*, with occasional reference to other standard works such as Vietor's *Elemente der Phonetik*: always striving to keep in mind that every statement given to the class was a means to an end, not an end in itself, and that anything that would not be of practical service in the work of the year had to be eliminated.

The vowel-sounds were presented on the board in a slightly modified form of the customary triangle. When the class could give with sufficient certainty the required sound, either when the number was named or the position of the sound pointed out on the diagram, I explained to them the great utility of a phonetical alphabet, "one sign for one sound and one sound for one sign," and told them that, while French was not written so ordinarily, we should begin to write it so, using the "symbols" of the International Phonetical Association. The symbols for the oral vowels were then placed beside the numbers. With later classes I have found it a help to use colored chalk exclusively for the phonetical symbols during the first year. This avoids any possible confusion between "sound-representation" and "traditional spelling." Then the nasal vowels were taken up, but on a "triangle" of their own. By letting the students first give the oral vowel-sound, then nasalize it, the production of nasal sounds was mastered with an ease and correctness I had never been able to obtain with classes who had to struggle against the obsession of the sight of "conventional spelling." At this stage of advancement, which can be reached with some classes in the third week, the work with the phonograph can be begun with great profit. I actually did that the following year with a beginning class, whose work cannot, however, be quoted as typical, on account of its small size.

No phonographs being available for the French class in 1905, we had to do the best we could with the phonetical script. After all the French sounds and their symbols had been gone over began the formal study of "the writing of French." No grammar in common use in this country brings out the important fact that a careful consideration of French "spellings" practically covers the field of French inflection and furnishes a most excellent foundation for the rational study of all inflected words. This mode of pro-

cedure not only relieves the tedium of mechanical memorizing of "grammatical rules," it also seems to quicken the students' interest in "language" in general, even in those boys whose greatest interest lies in other directions. If there is a reason for things in French, is there not one also in English? This curiosity could of course not always be satisfied, but it certainly enhanced the value of the work to have awakened it.

While it was necessary to present this work to the class in a perfectly "digested" form, stripped of all unnecessary technicalities, I used as the basis for the consideration of the "spellings" of French sounds Vietor's *Elemente der Phonetik*, and, generally, for the relation of written to spoken French, and the "reason why" of such relation, Nyrop's *Grammaire historique de la langue française*, Darmstetter's *Cours historique de la langue française* and *Le seizième siècle en France*, Clédat's *Grammaire raisonnée de la langue française*, Koschwitz' *Neufranzösische Formenlehre nach ihrem Lautstande*, and Didot's *Observations sur l'orthographe*.

As soon as the study of the "spelling" of vowel-sounds had been finished, we began to use the reader. Part of the first story had, indeed, already been given the class in phonetical script. The sight of written French reacted immediately unfavorably on the pronunciation, the nasal vowels being perhaps the worst sufferers. Experience with later classes has taught me that the longer the reading of French can be delayed the better results can be obtained with the pronunciation. Even a third of the first year might not be too much time to devote to the thorough establishment of a good pronunciation.

The order of procedure in the reading-lesson was the following. I read and translated the advance-lesson myself, till the students were able to translate alone without loss of time. Any student was allowed to get the "mere translation" of the text from any other student, if he failed to get it in class, as long as he felt he needed this help. After the irregular verbs had been finished, few students in the class were willing to admit that they found translation "hard," and the assignment of a translation-lesson for the first day after vacations, or when "something was going on," was esteemed a treat. The usual assignment consisted of turning a

part of the assigned text into phonetical script, which in class was placed on the board by the students, read, corrected, and "commented upon"; and of learning the whole assigned text so that French questions based upon it could be answered in French.

In this latter part of the work the girls in the class invariably outshone the boys, whose inferiority seemed to me to be caused by self-consciousness rather than by lack of ability. Their interest in the work was encouraging, however, especially when they proved it by declaring themselves willing to contribute their share toward paying for the phonographs, if I could make arrangements for their use.

These arrangements were successfully made, and the modest outfit was installed soon after Christmas. It consisted of two small machines, a larger one on which records could be made, two sets of records (the advanced course of the International School of Languages), a number of blank records, and the necessary attachments so that several students could use the same machine at one time. The whole expense was sixty-six dollars and a few cents. Next to the recitation-room there was, happily, a long narrow room, previously used as an office. This we converted ambitiously into the "laboratory" of the French department. One table for the large phonograph, two small ones for the small phonographs, placed as far apart as possible, an old book-case for the records, a bottle of gasoline (experience proved kerosene to be better), a bowl and a roll of cotton to wash the records, and the equipment was complete. The work could begin.

A schedule was made out which assigned to every student a twenty-minute practice-period five times a week, though only four of these periods were obligatory. The work of the class now consisted of *grammar*, twice a week (the exercises in *Larousse*, supplemented by the students' notebooks); *reading*, twice a week; "*phonograph*"-*recitation*, once a week. The first record we used contained some fables by La Fontaine, *La cigale et la fourmi*, *Le corbeau et le renard*, etc. The first difficulty was to get the students to "run" the phonographs with ease, the second, to get them to "work" profitably with them. The ideal way would be to assign not more than two students to a phonograph at one

time, and supervise the practice-periods, just as is done for laboratory periods in science-work. Two students work together very profitably sometimes, while some students do not get much good from their practice unless they are working alone. We had to assign four and even five students to one phonograph for the same period, and it was very rarely possible for me to be present during their practice.

In spite of the fact that the students enjoyed absolute and unrestrained liberty, the work proceeded in an orderly manner, and phonographs and records were carefully handled. Beyond the accidental breaking of one record, no damages occurred to the end of the year; and this is certainly noteworthy, considering that over forty students came and went in the "laboratory" at will.

When the first difficulties in handling the phonographs had been overcome, and the students had learned first to listen, and then to repeat with the records (no inconsiderable achievement, since it involves the difficulty of the French "stress-group"), different points were taken up for special attention. The placing and tension of sounds, the voicing of final consonants, length of vowels, or, perhaps, linking, or "accent," might be the object of "special attention" for the week. The same "special attention" might be given again to the same point on a new record, or the individual student might be paying "special attention" to some point, independently of the class. Sometimes the phonograph-recitation consisted merely of a "supervised practice-period," during which I sat down at the phonograph with the different groups by turns, or with individual students, and "worked" with them, correcting and suggesting, as the case might be. When a complete record, or a definite part of a record, had been duly practiced and memorized, the students were allowed to test their progress by making a record themselves. For this purpose the students were divided into groups, and a portion of the text to be recorded was assigned each member of the group, who, when his turn came, "spoke" it into the tube. When the record had been made, we listened to it and commented upon it, and, instructed by its shortcomings, the group withdrew to work some more, and do better at their next turn, while another group took their place. Sometimes the same group

made the record three or four times during one hour, and the improvement between the first and last record was often very striking.

Each group was also expected to place on the board, in the adjoining recitation-room, the phonetical transcription of the recorded text, just exactly as they had *heard* it, irrespective of "rules for pronunciation." This exercise sometimes gave rise to very fruitful discussions. The "variant" of any group of students (or individual student) who insisted that "that was what they had heard," was left to stand, unless the authors, after discussion and careful "listening," were ready to admit that their first observation had been erroneous. Experience soon taught to avoid fruitless discussion (for example, concerning length of vowels and even quality of *e*- and *o*-sounds in unstressed syllables, etc.). Some of the students became sensitive to fine points of pronunciation, whose existence is scarcely suspected by students who learn French chiefly from books.

Good records were generally kept awhile; poor ones were washed just as soon as they had been sufficiently criticized. The criticism of a record has a very different effect, however, from the correction of pronunciation in class; its "impersonality" seems to take all the sting out of it. The self-consciousness and even bashfulness of the boys, which had interfered with their progress in the school-room, disappeared altogether in the "laboratory." The boy who in class would have been too ill-at-ease to repeat with profit the same sentence three times in French would cheerfully repeat it for me a dozen times, if necessary, in the "laboratory." I obtained the best results, indeed, toward the end of the year and the next year, when I arranged to make records with only three or four students at one time. With supervised practice-periods this would be an easy thing to do.

The phonographs had not been in use three weeks before their effect became apparent in the classroom. The improvement both in understanding my questions and answering them was very marked. The facility of understanding was extended to "unprepared" texts: short "unseen" stories, like *Le cheval volé*, were readily understood, easily repeated, and reproduced in writing by the class.

The responsiveness of the students proved so encouraging that in the spring I made a bolder venture. I made a record of a few short, easy stories, taken from books to which the students could not possibly have had access. I picked out a select group of students (two boys and one girl), and asked them to "work out" the record, and bring the stories to me in writing. It was the first time they had been asked to "listen" without having at the same time anything to "look at," and the records given them were far from being so good as those they were accustomed to use. With the slightest possible help, which consisted in my pronouncing distinctly a few passages which gave them trouble, the students made out the stories and wrote them out. This type of work does demand on the part of the student earnestness, patience, and a certain maturity, and undoubtedly other members of the class would not have been able to do it at all. Those who did do it, however, considered it exceedingly profitable.

Just this elasticity, this possibility of taking individuality into account, and, without working a hardship on the less-gifted members of the class, providing for the needs of the "above-the-average" student, who is so completely slighted in the usual plan of work, would certainly prove a most valuable feature, if this method of work were further perfected; for these few experiments, tried under all kinds of material difficulties, are far from having exhausted its possibilities.

The laboratory-method of studying modern languages has already found eager advocates, and phonographs have already become part of the equipment of many schools, even with other purposes besides the study of language. But their use has not yet become so common and familiar that these practical suggestions as to the way they can be handled in connection with classroom work may not save time and trouble for those desirous of trying them, and perhaps even furnish the decisive momentum for their introduction into some French classrooms. Aside from actual results, which will certainly not fail, if the experience of other instructors at all resembles mine, the very responsiveness and appreciation of the students will well repay all the time and trouble expended.